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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000249

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PINR SOCI IZ IR

SUBJECT: KARBALANS "SPECIAL NEEDS" VOTING PROBLEM-FREE

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Don Cooke for reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: "Special needs" voting in Karbala on January 28 proceeded smoothly. Some 19,000 out of approximately 24,000 eligible voters cast ballots. Polling sites in the western, central and eastern sectors of the province were calm and orderly, with voters taking evident care to read and complete the ballots. Security was heavy but observers experienced no difficulties entering polling sites. There were no major irregularities, but unsubstantiated rumors of skullduggery abound, including some wild tales of Iranian machinations. End Summary.

Barely a Hiccup...

¶2. (C) Voting in Karbala on January 28--the so-called "special needs" date reserved for members of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), hospital and emergency personnel, and prisoners and patients--proceeded smoothly. According to provincial officials, some 19,000 out of approximately 24,000 eligible voters cast ballots. PRT teams possessing Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) observer credentials visited polling sites in the western (Ayn al-Tamr), central (Karbala City) and eastern (al-Hindiyah) sectors of the province. At each location, the teams encountered groups of citizens (up to one-fourth of whom were women) standing patiently in line as those within the voting booths took evident care to read and complete the ballots. A Karbala polling site near the Government Center was jammed with several hundred uniformed police personnel clearly enjoying the respite from their duties; several said they were told the wait-time for voting would be approximately 90 minutes. Delays were attributable to the long time it took poll workers to find voters' names on the rolls, according to a media contact.

¶3. (C) Security throughout the province was heavy, but observers from the PRT and other organizations experienced no difficulties entering polling sites. IHEC credentials were requested and examined courteously and observers were permitted unrestricted access and told they could stay as long as they wished. There have been no reports of observers being prevented from speaking to site workers, other observers or voters. According to local UNAMI representative Ali Kamonah, all the polling sites opened on-time at 0700. Only two irregular incidents were reported: Voters at a site in al-Hindiyah were encouraged to vote for the political party represented by one of the two official observers (one IHEC and one political-party observer were detailed to each site to watch over the ballot boxes), and patients at a hospital in Ayn al-Tamr claimed medical staff voted on their behalf. At 1700, all the polling sites closed and the ballot boxes were transferred under heavy security to IHEC's offices to be guarded around the clock until January 31, when they--along with boxes from the general Election Day--will be opened and votes tabulated.

...But Rumors Abound

¶4. (C) Although there have been no reports of major irregularities in the balloting, government and commercial contacts have shared unsubstantiated rumors of improprieties they claim to have heard from their friends and families. According to one, Iran has shipped in thin plastic sheaths voters can slip over their fingers to foil the ink-stain used to identify persons who have cast their ballots. Badr Corps supporters supposedly are employing these, along with a special spray (also from Iran), that removes the ink. Another rumor is that Prime Minister Maliki sent 4,000 of his Q
Another rumor is that Prime Minister Maliki sent 4,000 of his guards to Karbala to vote for Da'wa party candidates.

¶5. (C) Among police in Karbala, a story circulated that those who failed to vote for the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq-backed "Hope of the Two Rivers" list headed by Mohammad Hamid al-Musawi would be reassigned to remote postings. Mohammad's brother, BG Ali Hamid al-Musawi, until recently was Karbala's police commander. Meanwhile, their cousin--Safaa al-Musawi--is a Da'wa party activist and supporter of the "State Law Coalition" list that features Governor Aqeel Mahmoud al-Khzali (candidate number 8). A similar tale forecast unpleasant career consequences would befall ISF personnel who did not vote for this list. Another rumor holds that a fatwa urging citizens to vote issued some weeks ago by Ali al-Sistani has been reprinted and circulated here with additional verbiage--attributed to the Grand Ayatollah--instructing citizens to select the "State Law Coalition."

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Comment

¶6. (C) The success of the "special needs" voting day here is a testament to the hard work of IHEC, the ISF and others who for months sweated the details of the balloting process. It will increase the eagerness of ordinary citizens here to vote, and we anticipate a record turnout on January 31. As for skullduggery real and imagined, we expect locals to continue telling tales whose veracity will become clear only in the cold light of the post-election period. End Comment.

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